Revisiting Tribal Criteria: An Analytical Case for Pahari Inclusion in the ST Framework of Chenab Valley

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The debate over Scheduled Tribe recognition in India has always existed at the intersection of anthropology, constitutional law, and political economy. In the context of the Chenab Valley—comprising Doda, Kishtwar, and Ramban—the demand for inclusion of Pahari-speaking communities into the Scheduled Tribe framework presents a compelling case that demands analytical clarity rather than administrative hesitation. The issue is not merely one of classification but of aligning policy with empirical realities and constitutional intent.

At the core of this discourse lies Article 342 of the Constitution of India, which empowers the State to identify and notify Scheduled Tribes based on objective considerations. Complementing this provision are Article 15(4) and Article 46, which obligate the State to advance the educational and economic interests of socially and educationally backward sections. These constitutional principles are not static; they are designed to evolve with changing socio-economic contexts. However, in practice, the identification process continues to rely heavily on the framework established by the Lokur Committee, whose criteria, though historically significant, require critical re-evaluation in contemporary settings.

An analytical approach to the Pahari case must begin with measurable indicators. Socio-economic data from the Chenab Valley consistently reflects structural disadvantages. Literacy levels in remote areas remain well below the national average of approximately 74 percent, with female literacy in several mountainous pockets estimated at less than 50 percent. This disparity is not incidental but indicative of limited access to educational infrastructure, compounded by geographical constraints. Similarly, the region’s economic profile reveals a heavy dependence on subsistence agriculture, with minimal diversification into industry or services. Estimates suggest that nearly two-thirds of the population relies on agriculture for livelihood, often under conditions of low productivity and market inaccessibility.

Healthcare accessibility further reinforces the argument of deprivation. In many parts of Doda, Kishtwar, and Ramban, primary health facilities are either inadequately staffed or geographically distant, requiring hours of travel under challenging terrain. Seasonal disruptions caused by snowfall and landslides exacerbate this condition, effectively isolating communities for extended periods. Such patterns align closely with the criterion of geographical isolation, not as an abstract category but as a lived and recurring experience.

Cultural distinctiveness constitutes another critical dimension of analysis. The Pahari linguistic continuum, encompassing dialects such as Bhaderwahi, Pogli, and Kishtwari, represents a unique socio-linguistic identity that has been historically preserved due to relative isolation. Cultural practices in the region exhibit a syncretic character, blending Sufi influences with indigenous traditions, thereby creating a distinct social fabric. From an anthropological standpoint, such features satisfy the criterion of distinctive culture in both form and function.

The analytical challenge arises when considering the remaining Lokur criteria, particularly “primitive traits” and “shyness of contact.” These concepts, rooted in mid-twentieth-century anthropological thinking, lack definitional precision and empirical measurability. Contemporary scholarship and policy discourse, including observations from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, have increasingly questioned their relevance. In the case of the Paharis, the notion of “shyness of contact” is particularly problematic. Migration trends indicate significant outward movement of youth seeking employment in urban centers, suggesting not a reluctance to engage with the mainstream but a structural compulsion to do so under unequal conditions.

From an analytical standpoint, therefore, the evaluation must prioritize criteria that are empirically verifiable—namely, backwardness, geographical isolation, and cultural distinctiveness. On all three counts, the Pahari communities of Chenab Valley demonstrate clear alignment with the requirements historically associated with Scheduled Tribe classification. The persistence of socio-economic deprivation, combined with infrastructural deficits and cultural uniqueness, establishes a strong case for inclusion.

The counterarguments often invoked in policy discussions tend to revolve around administrative caution, potential overlaps with existing categories, or the need for further verification. While procedural rigor is essential, it must not become a substitute for decision-making. The prolonged absence of recognition, despite substantial evidence, risks undermining the credibility of the classification process itself. It creates a perception that the criteria are applied inconsistently, influenced as much by political considerations as by objective assessment.

An analytical framework must also consider the broader implications of inclusion. Recognition as a Scheduled Tribe would enable access to reservation in education and employment, targeted welfare schemes, and institutional support mechanisms. These are not merely benefits; they are corrective tools designed to bridge historical gaps in development. For a region like Chenab Valley, where structural disadvantages have persisted over decades, such interventions could have transformative effects.

At the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge that inclusion alone is not a panacea. Without parallel investments in infrastructure, education, and healthcare,

the benefits of recognition may remain limited. However, the absence of recognition effectively excludes these communities from a range of policy instruments that could facilitate such development. In analytical terms, ST status functions as an enabling condition rather than a complete solution.

The continued reliance on the Lokur Committee without contextual adaptation reflects a broader issue within policy frameworks—namely, the tension between historical guidelines and contemporary realities. A dynamic approach would involve reinterpreting these criteria in light of measurable indicators and current socio-economic conditions, rather than adhering to rigid formulations that may no longer be relevant.

In conclusion, an objective and evidence-based analysis of the Pahari communities of Doda, Kishtwar, and Ramban supports their inclusion within the Scheduled Tribe framework. The convergence of backwardness, geographical isolation, and cultural distinctiveness provides a strong empirical foundation, while constitutional principles reinforce the normative imperative for inclusion. The delay in recognition, therefore, cannot be justified on analytical grounds. It reflects a gap between policy intent and implementation that must be addressed with urgency and clarity.

The question is no longer whether the Paharis qualify under existing frameworks. The question is whether those frameworks will be applied with the consistency, adaptability, and fairness that the Constitution demands.